EDITORIAL

Not So Happy Meals

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It’s standard marketing: pitch your product to the most easily persuadable. Or as Roy Bergold, a former McDonald’s head of advertising, argued once: “Go after kids.” McDonald’s has done just that with the Happy Meal, a choice of burgers, nuggets, fries and other specialties with a must-have toy.

According to a recent consumer survey, 37 percent of kids rank McDonald’s as the top fast-food restaurant. This is nearly four times as many as those favoring the No. 2 chain, Subway. The key is heavy advertising to children — Happy Meals account for about 10 percent of McDonald’s ad spending— and, of course, the toys.

A Happy Meal of cheeseburger with fries and soda packs 640 calories, more than half the U.S.D.A. daily allowance for a sedentary child aged 4 to 8, as well as about half the allotment of fat. McDonald’s has added healthier choices to its menu — things like milk and Apple Dippers with low-fat caramel dip. But a [study](http://cspinet.org/new/pdf/kidsmeals-report.pdf) at 44 McDonald’s outlets from the Center for Science in the Public Interest found that French fries were automatically put in the bag 93 percent of the time.

The Happy Meal is up for some well-deserved scrutiny. Last week a mom from Sacramento filed a class-action suit supported by the center to make McDonald’s stop using toys as bait to lure children. Last month, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed a measure requiring that meals sold with toys meet a minimum standard of nutrition.

McDonald’s chief executive, Jim Skinner, has pushed back at what he calls the “food police,” arguing that these actions seek to deprive families of choice. A company spokeswoman told us, “We are proud of our Happy Meals and intend to vigorously defend our brand, our reputation and our food.”

Parents are responsible for their children’s diet. And they certainly could do a better job: almost 17 percent of American children are obese, three times as many as in the 1970s. But it would be easier for parents to do their job if they didn’t have to push back against the relentless tide of marketing aimed at their children.

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